



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



JOHN RETTIG

## THE ART OF A SCENE-PAINTER

BY ALEXANDRINA RAMSAY

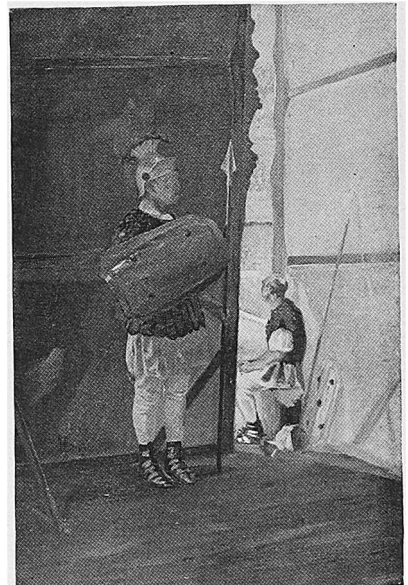
*With original illustrations by John Rettig.*

THE critics tell us that landscape-painting is a modern art, and the same may be said of scene-painting. Perhaps there may have been no improvement in plays since the days of Shakespeare, but in the manner of their production the advance is so great that it can scarcely be estimated. The contrast between the Shakespearean order of things—when they used to put up a sign-board labeled—"This is the Forest of Arden," or "this is a river," to indicate changes of scene, and that of the modern stage, is perhaps as great as can be adduced in the recent history of any other art or occupation.

One no longer, or at least, seldom, sees Greek or Roman plays surrounded with Renaissance architecture, or Chinese dramas with the characters attired in the dress of North American Indians; although it is only a comparatively short time ago that such incongruities were accepted without a murmur by the public.

Now, however, a standard for scene-painting has been set. That art to-day exacts not only imagination and ideality, but a wide knowledge of history and architecture. The public of the present time, which is a traveled public, and familiar with things as they should be, requires that every detail of theatrical scenes, interior as well as exterior, shall be presented in a state as nearly approaching perfection as the exigencies of the stage will permit.

The means employed in the various forms of art are very different, but the end aimed at should be the same, to stir and move the heart and mind, to lift it out of the commonplace; and to idealize the literal and make it subservient to some grand and beautiful conception of the imagination. Every great work has a mystery in it that carries it beyond the mere facts into a dreamland of sentiment and fancy. At present the taste for realism tends to extravagance and to the abuse of scenic possibilities. The Greeks had no scenery. Their imaginations were so quick that they did not need it. Is it possible that this demand of ours for realism is a proof that we are growing deficient in that direction? Many persons whose



HIS FIRST APPEARANCE



A STREET-SCENE IN TUNIS

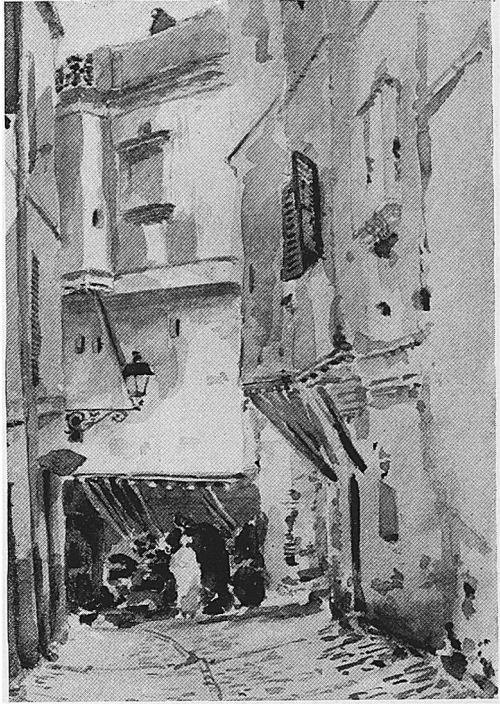
opinions are entitled to great consideration, contend that scenic splendor is the ruin of the drama; that it subordinates Shakespeare to the upholsterer, the carpenter, and the property-man; makes the manager a showman, and reduces the actor to a lay-figure. Scenery, we are told, is the bane of acting, or, rather,

is a device to conceal the actor's want of power.

No one pretends that music and scenery are essential to acting. There could be and has been good acting without either. All that is contended is, that they are aids to acting, and that, skillfully employed, they attune the mind to the poet's conception and the actor's delineation of character and emotion demanded by the play.

It is from the unsuitability of some scenery that any objection to it arises, since the effect of incongruity is fatal to dramatic illusion. The error lies not in the imagination, but in any inappropriateness of decoration and scenery. The true objection is not that it is overdone, but that it is ill done.

When the old Globe Theatre was rebuilt in London in 1614, after the fire that had destroyed it the previous year, many innovations and improvements were introduced. Upon a por-



A HOUSE IN ALGIERS



A STREET IN CONSTANTINE, ALGIERS

tion of the stage seats were allowed to be placed, and these were usually occupied by the gallants, critics, and wits of the day. There were no movable painted scenes; the stage was merely decorated with curtains, and with arras or tapestry. The roof was hung with blue cloth to represent the sky, or was painted that color. Draperies of black cloth indicated that the play to be presented was a tragedy.

Hamlet declared, "The play's the thing," but many of the old sentiments have undergone change, and it seems as if we now want the scenery quite as much as we do the play. The scene-painter gets an equal share of applause with the author. John Rettig, whose pictures accompany this article, is a native of Cincinnati, and to him belongs the honor of having given to this form of art a new value and significance. His first work was fresco-painting, which he began when only



MEXICAN PEONS

fifteen years of age. Some years later he took up modeling and decoration, at the time when the Rookwood and other potteries were coming into notice, and Cincinnati was developing the artistic appreciation which now makes her one of the art-centres of the west. He next turned his talent to the painting of scenery, and

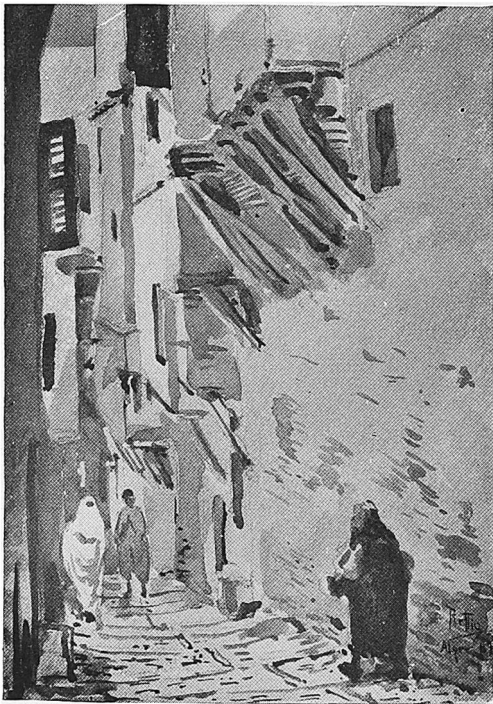


since that time, has been constantly advancing in this branch of art, until he has attracted the attention of those interested in scenic painting in all the large cities of this country.

It is curious to note how well a certain demand is supplied when it is a natural growth of any community, and how admirably individual talent fits an artistic development. When the citizens of Cincinnati desired to procure a novelty for their annual festival they consulted Mr. Rettig, and the consequence was the first of the great open-air theatrical spectacles which have since become familiar to us. The difficulties of painting scenery so complicated—so different in every respect from that of the ordinary stage—yet so exacting in the requirements of the details—vanished utterly before the quick brush of this artist, while his inventive faculties made the work of construction not only a possible, but a



AN ALLEY IN ALGIERS

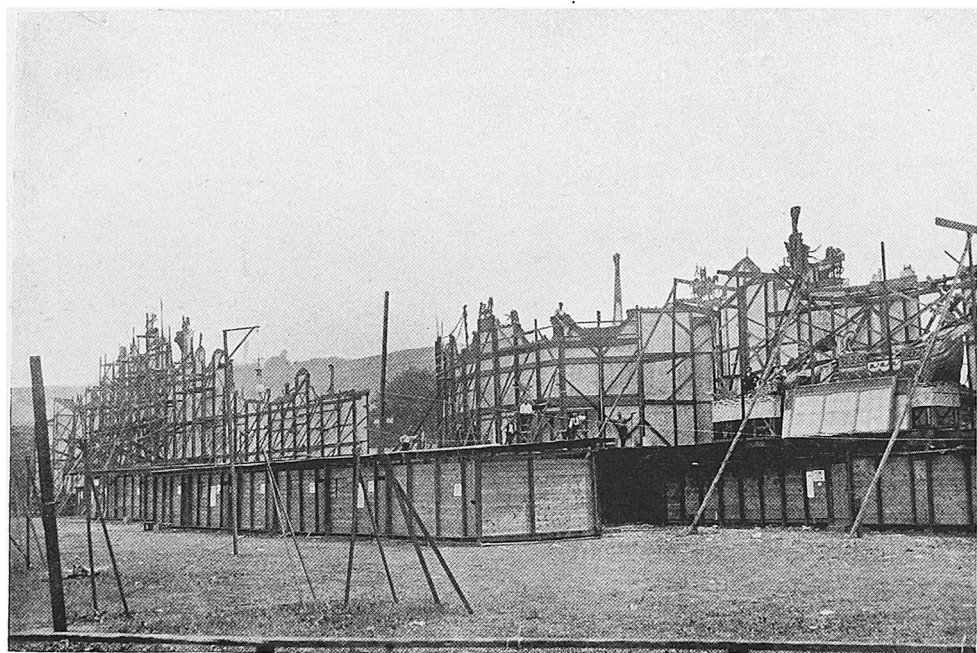


A CORNER OF ALGIERS

comparatively easy task. The result was an astonishment to everyone. On a space of open ground scenery of gigantic dimensions was put up on an immense stage, and there never was presented a spectacle wherein the delusions were so perfect.

Although the entertainment was called a drama by its managers, yet such a name was altogether incorrect, for it contained nothing of dramatic action, but was a sort of pantomime representing Babylon in its bloom (which at the same time was its deepest state of corruption) and finally ended with the destruction of the whole town. Owing to the tremendous success of this production, the "run," which was originally planned for one week, was extended to two, and the "show" was afterward brought to New York, where it was conducted during an entire summer.

Next followed a magnificent Roman



BACK VIEW OF THE OPEN-AIR STAGE

pageant, which for richness of costume, marvelous management of the stage—which disciplined into perfect order, in the parades and marches, a company of actors and employees numbering from 800 to 1,000 people, surpassed anything that had ever been attempted of this kind in the world. The taste of the American people for the immense and the grandiose was satisfied.



THE PALACE OF THE CÆSARS

The energy, study, and invention necessary to successfully accomplish these entertainments, place Mr. Rettig in a unique position in the artistic world. As his work calls for an uncommon knowledge of archæology, this indefatigable worker feels it necessary to obtain the "local coloring" on the spot, and he gathered the substance for his first attempt by personal journeyings in the Orient. The interesting studies of streets and quaintly costumed figures, re-

produced here from water-colors bright with all the sunshine of Algiers and Egypt, are some of the side-results of such foreign travel and work.

The events in the life of Montezuma form the basis of another of his spacious entertainments: but before constructing it Rettig went to Mexico in order to obtain



STRANDED

there all the information possible from local study to supplement his historical knowledge as to the way the scenic accessories ought to be arranged. The ordinary spectator does not appreciate, because he fails to realize, the amount of research and artistic as well as mechanical exertion indispensable to his thorough enjoyment of one of these displays; therefore he fails to give sufficient credit for his sense of satisfaction to the painstaking art, intelligence and completeness, of the work of the designer and builder of the vast stage-picture before him.

The spectacular displays with which Mr. Rettig's name is so closely connected, essay in each case to illustrate some one great historical event or masterpiece of the imagination; and it can readily be seen how great a medium of popular education they may become when developed with artistic and historical accuracy. The strictly scientific critic might pronounce this labor wasted, when the result was to be expressed only in the swiftly vanishing structures of a season's drama; but he forgets that the public has transferred the scene and the story, as confidently accepted knowledge, into a retentive memory.



"OGALLALA FIVE"